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ABSTRACT

Noting that North Carolina is a leader in the integration of family support into services for families with young children, this brochure provides practical information and guidelines for family supportive early care and education programs, early intervention, parenting programs, and health services for families with young children. The brochure notes that family support is a change strategy cutting across all social strata, family types, and professional disciplines. The brochure defines family support and details the mandate for such support in federal and state legislation and regulations for many child and family service programs. The benefits of family involvement are delineated for families; for providers, staff, and trainers; and for communities, programs or agencies, policymakers, and government bodies. Guidelines for supportive early childhood care and education include parents participating in decisions about their child's care and education, and programs linking families with a range of services. Guidelines for family supportive early intervention include providing a formal orientation for families and giving parents needed information for their meaningful involvement. Guidelines for supportive parenting education programs include enhancing the cultural values of parents and families, and affirming and building on parents' strengths and knowledge. Guidelines for supportive health services include using a two-generation approach and connecting parents to other parents. The brochure also notes supportive program evaluation practices, including the inclusion of program participant representatives on the evaluation team and working explicitly to overcome possible barriers. A list of organizations that have helped develop family support practice information and assessment procedures completes the brochure. (KB)

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PROGRAM SERVICES PAPERS

Family Support

FAMILY SUPPORT – A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN

(...MORE THAN A NICE THING TO DO!)

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Family Support

As a 15 year old first time mother, Jessica **began working with a parent educator from the Parents As Teachers program funded by her local Smart Start partnership. Over time, strong bonds of trust and care grew between this young mother and her parent educator. Jessica felt secure in sharing her concerns about her drug infested neighborhood and her desire to create a better life for her baby. She began to model the activities that the parent educator provided, taking advantage of information on child development, well-baby check-ups and homemade toys. Jessica participated in a program to finish her GED at the Smart Start funded family resource center located within the neighborhood. During GED classes, Jessica's son played nearby in an infant-toddler classroom with supervised care. Family support at its best guided Jessica in obtaining a high school diploma, locating a quality child care program and finding a job that, today, has her young family moving toward economic stability.**

With three children under the age of five, Jim and Diane P. attend their Smart Start funded Family Resource Center as a family. Diane made the following comment:

"To us, it's like home. Everything is under one roof!" An infant, toddler and preschool classroom provides developmentally appropriate activities while parents attend classes on positive parenting skills. "I used to think I was supposed to hit my kids just like I was," said Jim, "Now I've learned a better way." This young family appreciates the variety of books they can borrow to read to their children. "Before these classes, our TV was on all the time," said Diane, "Now we take walks, play games and enjoy our special time together."

These are just a few examples that demonstrate how Family Support is at the center of effective programs serving families with young children 0-5 years of age. Although different terminology may be used, family support, family-centered care, family-focused, systems of care, and family-friendly are all terms that speak to the inclusion of supportive, empowering and preventive approaches that include developing partnerships with families. North Carolina is a leader in the integration of family support into education, early intervention, health and human services for families with young children. North Carolina's Smart Start Initiative and the North Carolina Early Intervention system are examples of this multi-dimensional, comprehensive approach. Family support as a core service is foundational to supporting and fostering children's development and their families' well being. This paper will provide practical information and guidelines for family supportive early care and education programs, early intervention, parenting and health services for families with young children.

Family Support is for ALL families, not just low wealth or at-risk families. As a strategy for change, family support cuts across all social strata, family types and professional disciplines. It is the key to creating thriving families and communities. Family Support America (FSA), the national family support organization, uses the term "family support" to describe a comprehensive system of community-based services designed to:

- Promote the well-being and increase the strength and stability of children and families
- Increase parents' confidence and competence in their parenting abilities
- Enhance child development

(*Making the Case for Family Support* Family Support America c 1996)

Family Support America has identified nine principles that guide the use of a family support approach. These principles cross traditional lines of disciplines and services, and as guidelines, help practitioners, families and policy makers ensure family supportive practices.

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Family Support

Principles of Family Support

- Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and mutual respect.
- Staff enhances families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members – adults, youth, and children.
- Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.
- Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.
- Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.
- Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
- Staff works with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
- Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
- Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance and administration.

Why is Family Support Important?

"Reports on the conditions of children, youth and families show that an increasing number of families with children live with poverty, racism, and substance abuse in communities that provide few resources to support them or help them solve complicated problems." *McCroskey* (1998) "Low-income children are nearly twice as likely to have serious mental or physical disabilities." *Children's Defense Fund* (1999). With increased geographic mobility and an ever-changing economy, what we think of as traditional support for families is often not available.

The sobering evidence describing the needs of children and families compels us to examine and implement what we know to be effective. Research demonstrates the impact that families and communities have on the healthy development of children. Recent studies increasingly suggest that a strong, secure attachment to a nurturing adult can have a protective biological function, not only supporting optimal development, but also providing children with the internal resources to withstand stress. Yoshikawa's research (1995) highlights that "programs that address multiple risk factors and that blend aspects of both family support and early childhood education are the most promising." It stands to reason that a key strategy for presenting and reducing at-risk behavior and delinquency is to guide and strengthen families to recognize their vital role in serving as their children's first and most important teachers.

Evaluations of specific, comprehensive and sustained family support programs have provided evidence of specific impacts on one or more of the following:

- Increased self-confidence, knowledge of child development and parenting skills
- Greater educational attainment among parents
- Increased educational achievement of children and youth
- Reduction in juvenile delinquency
- Improved behavior and performance of children in school
- Fewer incidents of child abuse and neglect

Developing a Statewide Family Support Agenda: Options for Planners Family Support America c.1997

Family Support

What are the Mandates for Family Support?

Family Support is more than just a good idea; it is a programmatic requirement in federal and state legislation and regulations for many child and family service programs.

Federal legislation and federally funded programs

The public laws that authorized Head Start, Early Head Start, CCDF (Comprehensive Child Development Programs), Healthy Start and IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) all mandate family involvement and broad family supportive services. The legislation contains specific expectations for families to be involved in the planning, provision and evaluation of services, and for family support needs to be included in service delivery. Public Law 101-476 (IDEA) includes provisions that guarantee the rights of parents to participate in the educational decision-making process and further mandates that state personnel development efforts include competencies in appropriate family support practice.

Interagency Agreements and State Mandates

The following examples illustrate North Carolina's commitment to help assure and enforce comprehensive services for young children and their families.

- As part of the Smart Start initiative, the North Carolina Partnership for Children, a state non-profit agency committed to improving the health and well-being of families with young children, has family support as a core service and mandates family participation on its state board as well as each of the 82 local Smart Start governing boards.
- The North Carolina Division of Women's and Children's Health Section has revised all basic training for Maternal Outreach and Community Health Workers to include a family support philosophy and approach.
- North Carolina's Interagency Agreement (for the provision of services to children with or at risk for disabilities ages birth through five and their families) reflects that different state, public and private agencies have agreed to promote family support and family-centered care in all facets of the service delivery system through funding family support, establishing policies that require family involvement and family support, and focusing on family support in staff training.

- Local Interagency Coordinating Councils (LICC's), established under IDEA, have endorsed the use of family support benchmarks when designing policies and programs.

Benefits of Family Involvement

(Jeppson, 1995)

Family Involvement benefits all parties concerned in the following ways:

For families:

- Provides the opportunity to effect meaningful change
- Offers leadership role models for other families
- Develops a fresh perspective on how services should be delivered

For providers, staff and trainers:

- Develops providers' knowledge and skills
- Makes providers accountable to families
- Develops a constituency that can advocate for programs

For communities, programs or agencies, policymakers, government bodies:

- Increases visibility of and respect for program in community
- Provides a reality check for legislators, providers and staff
- Keeps programs responsive and realistic

Family Support

How is Family Support Integrated in Early Childhood Care and Education Services?

Early childhood care and education can be an important example of family support, but too often is not considered in this context. While child care is primarily responsible for the care and education of young children, it can also be an intersection for families and other services. "The content of preventive early childhood programs should be such that they attempt to enhance parents' social support, foster positive parenting and family interactions, guide the child's cognitive development and reduce family level and community level poverty." *Yoshikawa* (1995) Child care and education professionals recognize that caring and educating young children necessitates the active, equitable and meaningful involvement of children's parents. From its inception, Head Start pioneered these efforts by mandating the incorporation of families in its programs. NAEYC, the national professional organization that guides the field's standards, lists in its benchmarks for effective child care services: "Establish reciprocal relationships with families." Guidelines for supportive child care and early education include:

- parents being welcome in programs and participating in decisions about their child's care and education,
- teachers responding with sensitivity to parents' choices and goals for their children,
- teachers and parents sharing their knowledge and understanding of the child's development in regular, frequent two-way communication, and
- programs linking families with a range of services and, with family permission, sharing information about children as they pass from one level or program to another. *NAEYC* 2000.

How is Family Support Integrated in Early Intervention?

The families of children with special needs have led the way to society's appreciation of the critical nature of their role in advocating for their children. Families have been instrumental as advocates and key players in establishing national policy and crafting precedent-setting strategies for the inclusion of parents in all aspects of the early intervention process. Guidelines for family supportive early intervention include:

- providing a formal orientation for families and giving parents needed information for their meaningful involvement,
- being ready to hear what families have to say, and
- respecting the passion families have for change.

How is Family Support Integrated in Parenting Education?

Many studies highlight the impact of families and communities on children's growth and development. Parenting education programs that are built upon the comprehensive needs of families result in a "system of parenting education that continuously learns about parenting needs and strives proactively to build the capacity of individuals, families and communities and the larger society." *Mertensmeyer*, 2000. The Pew Charitable Trusts (1996) reports that family supportive parenting education is seen as a central strategy for nurturing and empowering parents. Guidelines for family supportive parenting education programs include:

- staff working in partnership with parents,
- enhancing the cultural values of parents and families,
- parents having opportunities to practice what they learn,
- involving fathers and non-traditional caretakers, and
- affirming and building on parents' strengths and knowledge.

How is Family Support Integrated in Health Services?

"Physicians, nurses and public health professionals have become quick to recognize the congruence between family support and the goals of community health." (Keenan, FCRA Report 1998. Vol.17) Research on early brain development clarifies the critical nature of the first three years of life and connections between health, learning and behavioral problems are well documented. Zuckerman and Brazelton (1994) advocate for a new, two-generational approach to children's health that includes strategies for parents and children to be integrated with other human services, especially family support services. In 1997, The American Academy of Pediatrics reaffirmed a policy statement that included the following: "The medical care of infants, children and adolescents ideally should be accessible, continuous, comprehensive, family-centered, coordinated and compassionate." (*Sia, Ousterhous, Pandak* FRCA Report, 1998, Vol. 17) Guidelines for family support practices in health care programs should include:

- families at the center of the service system,
- integrating services for comprehensive solutions,
- providing support services including health education, counseling and transportation,
- using a two-generation approach, and
- connecting parents to other parents.

How Can We Evaluate Family Support?

There are several different approaches to the evaluation of family support services. Both quantitative (counts, attendance, scores) and qualitative (open-ended questions on surveys, focus groups, satisfaction surveys) strategies are needed. The evaluation approach, techniques and instruments should be congruent with family support principles. Evaluation processes that are family supportive are:

- participatory with families, staff and other stakeholders engaged in all stages of the process, including the design of the measurement instruments, data interpretation and dissemination of findings,
- conducted by teams that include members who are representative of the program participants, and
- explicitly working to overcome possible barriers, including cultural, educational, race and class.

These evaluation processes should measure outcomes that include:

- assessing families' feelings of being respected, listened to and valued as important members of a team providing services to their children,
- assessments and reports on the strengths of a program as well as areas for improvement,

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- recognition that families are often connected to multiple programs, systems and their evaluations,
- measuring the capacity of all programs and systems to work together to build community capacity, and
- not assigning responsibility for results inappropriately to a single program.

(Adapted from *A Program Managers Toolkit: Family Support Centers* Vol.1 Program Evaluation and Planning FSA 2000)

The following organizations have helped develop family support practice information and assessment instruments.

- Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center **www.fpg.unc.edu**
  - Brass Tacks
  - Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)
  - Early Intervention Services Assessment Scales (EISAS)
  - Quick Notes
- Beach Center on Families and Disability University of Kansas **www.beachcenter.org**
  - Family Centered Behavior Scale
- Institute for Family Centered Care **www.familycenteredcare.org**
  - Essential Allies: Families As Advisors Jeppson and Thomas
- Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute **www.puckett.org**
  18A Regent Park Blvd. Asheville, NC 28806
  Tel: 828-255-0470
- Family Infant and Preschool Program **www.fipp.org**
- Family Support America **www.familysupportamerica.org**

Conclusion

Raising healthy children today, and maximizing their full potential, is a collective effort. In this critical era of attention to young children, the most successful programs are those that address the needs of families in holistic and comprehensive ways. Successful strategies have family support principles woven throughout. These principles bring to light the inextricable link between early childhood care and education, early intervention, parenting education and health care. Through these linkages, and through partnerships between families and professionals, all families and children can be helped to reach their greatest potential.

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